TRANSCRIPT—JORDAN JENKINS

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Abstract: This interview was conducted by Sharon Fahrer as part of a project to document Weaverville's Black history, with support from the Preservation Society of Asheville & Buncombe County. Jordan Jenkins, Assistant Site Manager at the Vance Birthplace State Historic Site, shares her knowledge of the history of the Vance family, those they enslaved, and the early 1800s plantation they lived in, now owned and operated by the North Carolina Division of State Historic Sites.

Jordan Jenkins Interview, Part 1

Sharon Fahrer: So here we are. It's March 5th, 2026, and we're with Jordan Jenkins, the assistant site manager at the Vance Birthplace State Historic Site. Jordan, thanks for being here.

Jordan Jenkins: Thank you for having me,

Sharon Fahrer: and we're excited to hear about what the birthplace is, what it represents, and focusing on the enslaved people that were here.

Jordan Jenkins: Yeah, absolutely. So the Vance Birthplace, as the name implies, the full name is the Governor Zebulon B. Vance birthplace. So we were purchased by the State of North Carolina in the 1950s to preserve the birthplace of Zebulon Vance, who had been the governor of North Carolina during the Civil War. That being said, his family actually moved off of this property when he was around three or four years old.

So even though he was born here, he didn't actually grow up here. He grew up in what is now Marshall, North Carolina, as well as downtown Asheville. So the land that we have preserved

here, despite the name, is really great for interpreting the generations of Zebulon Vance's parents and grandparents, as well as the people that they enslaved here on their plantation.

So, in terms of guided tours, if you come out here, we focus a lot on the plantation that the Vances operated on this site basically from the 1790s up through the 1830s. And over time the Vances enslaved at least 25 people, we think, on this site. We know the names of at least 33 people that they enslaved both here and across North Carolina and East Tennessee.

But at any given time, the number of people they're enslaving, it just depends on what year you're looking at. At the year of Zebulon Vance's father, David Vance, Jr.'s death in 1844, we think that that is probably the most people that they enslaved at one time, which was 12. So this is a really interesting site in that it is an Appalachian plantation, which most people don't even realize the Appalachian plantations existed.

So really our job here is to interpret the world that Zebulon Vance was raised in, which was a western North Carolina that was very, very affected by, and a huge part of, the slave economy and culture of North Carolina.

Sharon Fahrer: What brought the Vances here?

Jordan Jenkins: So the first Vance to live in Reems Creek Valley was David Vance, Sr.

He was Zebulon Vance's grandfather, and he was born in the Winchester, Virginia area in the 1740s, around 1745, and he moved to what at the time was Rowan County, North Carolina, in the 1770s and married his wife, Priscilla Brank in 1775. And then a couple years later, in 1777, that area of Rowan County where they were living was carved out to then be Burke County.

So, they start off in the Burke County area along the Catawba River. And David, Sr., was a colonel in the Revolutionary War, and after the war he comes home and serves, as you know, at varying points, a member of the North Carolina House of Commons, the equivalent of the House of Representatives, for Burke County, and was one of the main people instrumental in getting Buncombe County carved off from Burke County then. And he was also a surveyor and Clerk of Court. So, through these various careers and business ventures, he was very much one of the people on the ground measuring and mapping out what is now Buncombe County. So he is someone who would've had a pretty good idea of where the plum land would've been for his interests of starting a plantation. So he ultimately purchases this land in the late 1780s, we believe, and is moved onto this property by about 1790, we think.

Sharon Fahrer: Now, did he have enslaved people?

Jordan Jenkins: At that time? Yes. So David Sr. brought with him from Virginia three enslaved people.

We are pretty sure that two of those people would've been Richard and Agnes. We don't know who the third person was for sure. But we know that when he bought this property to start a plantation here, he brought three enslaved people with him. And from there, there were basically two main family groups that the Vances enslaved:

The family group that branches off from Richard and Agnes and the family group that branches off from Jo and Leah, and a few other people like Hannah Prestwood, who was an enslaved person who was actually willed to the Vances from their neighbors, the Prestwood family.

Sharon Fahrer: So, wait, these Vances are the grandfather of Zebulon Vance?

Jordan Jenkins: Yes.

Sharon Fahrer: Okay. So before this became his father's property.

Jordan Jenkins: Mm-hmm.

Sharon Fahrer: So, tell us a little bit about how it became his father's property.

Jordan Jenkins: Yeah, so David Sr., when he passed away in 1813, he did a few interesting things in his will. So in terms of the land and the plantation here, he essentially split it between two of his sons, David Jr. and Robert, Robert Brank Vance. And David Jr. seems to have been the one who actually owned and operated the plantation for the most part, and his brother Robert had the option of living here.

Sharon Fahrer: So when you say plantation, what did exactly did they do here? Did they grow things for sale? Was it a subsistence situation? How did they?

Jordan Jenkins: They were growing things for sale. So again, usually when people think about plantations, they think about these sprawling properties either further east in North Carolina or deeper south. And they tend to think of crops such as cotton, rice, indigo, tobacco things like that.

But here in Western North Carolina and Southern Appalachia in general, we have a colder climate and a shorter growing season. So our land here is not super conducive to growing those kinds of cash crops per se. But what this land was very good for was growing staple food crops such as corn, as well as raising livestock.

So the Vance Plantation was mainly focused on raising hogs as well as growing corn. So those are the kinds of tasks, among, amongst many other jobs on this plantation and beyond, that the enslaved people here would've been doing.

Sharon Fahrer: What where was their market? Where did they sell these things?

Jordan Jenkins: So it changes over time.

In the 1820s, the Buncombe Turnpike is built and the turnpike allowed plantations across western North Carolina and eastern Tennessee to take that food and that those, the livestock that they had raised and drive it or drove it down the turnpike to markets in South Carolina. So that turnpike essentially led from Greenville, Tennessee down to Greenville, South Carolina. Pretty easy to remember that way. So the goal was to get it through the Saluda Gap into South Carolina to sell there. So basically, when you look at the plantation economy that had come to be, the plantations deeper south were essentially so focused on growing cash crops such as cotton, that they were not necessarily self-sufficient in terms of food production. And that is where these Appalachian plantations come in as plantations that were focused on food production. Food is being raised here in Western North Carolina and being sold down in South Carolina indirectly to feed enslaved people deeper south.

Sharon Fahrer: So, what kind of tasks would the enslaved people perform in this kind of economy and here?

Jordan Jenkins: And here? So basically, any kind of task that could be done, if it could be done by an enslaved person, was. So, there's also this general idea when people think about slavery in the Southern United States.

Most people default to thinking about agricultural labor when really the story is much broader than that. So here on this plantation, absolutely, a lot of enslaved people would have been doing agricultural labor. They would've been growing corn and raising hogs. But we know that the Vances also had a peach orchard on their plantation that we are pretty sure that they were using to distill into brandy. So most likely enslaved people here would've also had to be distilling. And we know the enslaved cook for the Vances was a woman named Leah Erwin. So she would've been up before sunrise and going to bed after sundown each day operating the Vance kitchen, both on this plantation and at their drover's stand that they eventually open in Marshall.

And people like Leah, they are not, they're not doing agricultural labor. They're performing the work of the tourist economy that's emerging in Western North Carolina. So people also tend to think of the tourist economy here as something that is relatively recent, when in reality, we've had a very tourism-driven economy since the 1820s. So Leah, for instance, was cooking for all the visitors stopping at their drover's stand. But one of the other people that the Vances enslaved at one point, named James, we think was eventually purchased by the

Patton family who operated the Eagle Hotel in downtown Asheville, and he was a blacksmith.

So he is now a blacksmith for the hotel and all their guests. And when you read travelogues for people coming through Western North Carolina before the Civil War, a lot of people are writing about how the maids and the staff of these hotels that are popping up all across this area are all enslaved people.

So by 1860, at least for the city of Asheville, the population of Asheville was around 50% enslaved. And that's, again, mainly people working in tourism. But there are many different kinds of jobs that enslaved people were doing across this area, not just agricultural labor. Also mining, again, something that people don't tend to think about per se, but enslaved people were being forced to mine both in Burke County as well as in some cases being rented out to people or being forced to move with their enslavers to California during the gold rush to begin mining for gold there. So.

Sharon Fahrer: But we had a gold rush here before California.

Jordan Jenkins: Right. So that's where you get some of that mining in Burke County.

Sharon Fahrer: I forgot what I was gonna say. I'm gonna think about this. I forgot what I was gonna say. Oh, so what happened after, when the Vances moved to Marshall?

Jordan Jenkins: Mm-hmm.

Sharon Fahrer: What happened to this land? What, who lived here or what?

Jordan Jenkins: So for about 10 years, we think, the Vances are both operating that drover stand in Marshall, as well as maintaining the plantation here. We don't know for sure who all is living and working here versus being at the drover stand. We know from some accounts that Leah Erwin, for instance, was at the drover stand cooking for the Vances and the visitors at the stand. But we don't know the exact breakdown of who was where at that time, and it probably just changed depending on the season and needs. But.

Sharon Fahrer: Maybe we should just explain what a drover stand was.

Jordan Jenkins: Probably good context for people. So I mentioned earlier the Buncombe Turnpike and that being a route for people moving, goods from throughout Western North Carolina and East Tennessee, deeper south than to South Carolina. That route is about 75 miles long, and we are talking about people herding just these massive groups of hogs and turkeys and chickens, as well as all of the corn and other food stuffs that they had grown and they're taking to market.

So they needed places to stop along that route to rest both themselves and their animals. So that is how you get these things called drover stands popping up along the turnpike. Basically, I like to describe a drovers stand as an 1800s motel. It's basically just a small inn where you could stay and rest as well as your animals.

That's at that same time, you're also getting luxury hotels popping up along the turnpike, and especially in downtown Asheville. But the drover stands would've been for, again, more working-class drovers, not the luxury hotels.

Sharon Fahrer: No. The luxury people would've gotten here by stagecoach, until there was railroads.

Jordan Jenkins: Right.

Sharon Fahrer: What did the Vance, the Vance's sell this place? What, what happened after the 10 years?

Jordan Jenkins: So in 1844, David Vance Jr., Zebulon Vance's father, passed away suddenly. And at that time, his two oldest sons, Robert and Zebulon, were teenagers, so they were not yet old enough to inherit, and his widow, Mira Vance, had some inheritance and property rights as a white woman in North Carolina in the 1840s.

But David Jr. passed away with a pretty high amount of debt. So Mira was essentially forced to auction off her late husband's estate in order to repay those debts. And at that time his estate included the rest of the property here, as well as 12 enslaved people who were put up for auction in September of 1844.

Sharon Fahrer: And who bought it?

Jordan Jenkins: So the land here was purchased by a man named Andrew Hemphill, who was a plantation owner in what is now McDowell County. He purchased this land for his son Benjamin, to take over with his wife Elizabeth. So the Hemphills are the ones who move into what had been the Vance plantation. But Benjamin is one of those people who ends up moving west for the gold rush in California and actually left Elizabeth Hemphill here as a single mother to three children in the 1850s.

Sharon Fahrer: And did she have enslaved people?

Jordan Jenkins: We know that she ended up selling two enslaved people. We have been trying desperately for years to figure out the names of these people so we can try to trace where they end up.

We have not made any inroads there yet, so hopefully we'll come across a document that'll tell us more about those two individuals. But it seems like those may have been the only people that she enslaved here. They're the only people we enslaved people from the Hemphills that we've found direct evidence of here.

But the broader Hemphill family was a pretty prominent plantation owning family in, particularly the McDowell County area around Old Fort.

Sharon Fahrer: So did the Vances have neighbors here who had enslaved people?

Jordan Jenkins: They did. So the Vances had the Brittains, Davidsons and Prestwoods as pretty immediate neighbors here. And you know, as is typical for this time period, you see a lot of intermarriage of the Vance children and the Davidson and Brittain children, as well as a lot of movement then of the people all of these plantation-owning families are enslaving as their children are marrying off and moving. They bring enslaved people with them. So in some cases we have people just moving from one enslaving family to the next, as is the case for Hannah Prestwood. And in the case of the Davidsons and Brittains, a good number of people end up in East Tennessee, as well.

Sharon Fahrer: Cause that's where they moved?

Jordan Jenkins: Mm-hmm.

Sharon Fahrer: Were there any free black people?

Jordan Jenkins: Not on this property that we know of, before the Civil War. I have not personally come across very much evidence of very many free African Americans before the Civil War in this Reems Creek Valley area.

Sharon Fahrer: I know we have an 1850 census and it does identify free people, but it doesn't say where they are exactly.

Jordan Jenkins: Right. And I could be wrong. There could be a document out there that I've not seen, but I don't think there was a very large, free black population, at least in the Reems Creek Valley at all at that point.

Sharon Fahrer: What about how the enslaved people themselves were treated?

Jordan Jenkins: Mm-hmm.

Sharon Fahrer: Were they kept together as family groups? Were they sold as money was needed, or as the children grew up and had their enslaved people? How would you describe how they were treated?

Jordan Jenkins: So in terms of family units and being separated, there was quite a bit of family and community separation in this area, for instance, with the enslaving families marrying and many people moving to East Tennessee. A lot of those Vances, Brittain and Davidson children are taking enslaved people with them regardless of family connection.

The closest thing that we have to a direct quote from one of the people that the Vances enslaved on this plantation, which is a letter from Mira Vance, Zebulon Vance's mother, to her niece, Margaret Davidson in East Tennessee in 1830. She was writing that letter just as a general check-in, and told her niece that she had given birth earlier that year to a new son who she named Zebulon Baird Vance. And then at the end of that letter, it's a postscript, and that postscript is written in Mira's handwriting from Agnes, a woman they were enslaving here, to Jane and Wilson, who the Vance niece's family was enslaving in East Tennessee and that postscript read "Old Agnes sends her love to Jane and Wilson and Ann and the black people here is all well. And tell Jane that Hannah Prestwood has a fine son in her old days." So, this is a case where we don't know for sure what the relationship was between Agnes and Jane and Wilson. It is very possible that Jane may have been one of Agnes and Richard's children that was separated from them. But it, she could have also been a cousin, a niece, just a dear friend. We don't know what that.

Sharon Fahrer: But it's interesting that they were allowed to have contact, because so many times you hear they don't know what happened to their relative who was separated from them.

Jordan Jenkins: Right. I think what's really poignant about that is that Agnes had this privilege of contact that many other enslaved people didn't with their loved ones. But that was a privilege that Mira Vance could have denied or revoked at any time. So the existence of this postscript, I think is, is an interesting look into how enslaved people like Agnes would've had to navigate their relationship with their enslavers. In the absence of any legal protection and any legal rights, enslaved people like Agnes were incredibly vulnerable to the personalities and the whims and the moods of their enslavers, and would have to navigate that very carefully.

Sharon Fahrer: So on a day-to-day basis, do we have any clues of how they were treated? Were there, was their satisfaction with their work? Were their complaints about anything like that? Anything harsh? Was there what you call a task master or

Jordan Jenkins: Right.

Sharon Fahrer: Or was it sort of managed directly by the band, the family members?

Jordan Jenkins: We don't know for sure. So, in the case of the Vances, what we don't have are any documents from any of the people they enslaved here that directly speak to their experiences and their emotions and their relationship with each other or the Vances. Nothing in the words of the enslaved people here. So we don't really have evidence of the Vances being particularly physically violent or cruel, for instance. But at the same time, we know that they were enacting the daily cruelty of enslaving other human beings. So that's one of the things that we really try to explore is the idea that there's really not a kind way to enslave another human being. And slavery was not a force of nature, it was a choice. And it was a choice that people like the Vances would wake up every day and continue to make because it, helped them remain or become wealthy. It was very legally, financially, and logistically complicated to free someone that your family was already enslaving. All these factors are at play, but at the same time, they were choices and there were people who made different choices.

So, I can't really say for sure what any of the people that the Vances enslaved on this plantation experienced on a day-to-day basis, other than the fact that they were here being forced to labor for another family, and that they were in an incredibly vulnerable position, in terms of being able to maintain their own family structures.

Sharon Fahrer: Do you think they had a church? Do you think they had an opportunity to practice religion?

Jordan Jenkins: We know that Agnes was a member of the Reems Creek Presbyterian Church. We have, I can't remember the exact year, but on one of their membership rosters, she is listed as a member in the enslaved section. So the Reems Creek Presbyterian Church is one of those churches in the area at that time who is accepting enslaved members. But that would've been a fairly segregated situation.

Sharon Fahrer: So where would that have been? I mean, was it along Reems Creek that they could walk to it, or was it down by Ox Creek or?

Jordan Jenkins: So you could walk to it, but it would be, a pretty long walk. They probably would've had to ride there. So basically, the Reems Creek Presbyterian Church historically stood where the Covenant Church is now on Reems Creek Road. So it's about, I would guess about a mile down Reems Creek Road here, but I'm also really bad at guessing distances, so please take that with a large grain of salt.

Sharon Fahrer: It's not that far. I mean, that is a walkable distance.

Jordan Jenkins: Yeah.

Sharon Fahrer: They could walk there. That's the reason that you'll see several, say several churches in a small community. Because everybody had to be able to walk to where they

were going to. Do you think that they had any interaction with people not connected to the plantation? Say, did they go to the general store in town or something like that? Is there any evidence?

Jordan Jenkins: Not that I've seen. So, what we do know is that Leah, for instance, cooking at the drover's stand, she probably would've had to interact with the visitors there. We have a story from their time at the drover's stand where basically Zebulon was a young teenager at this time and some of their visitors asked him to bring them some liquor and to pull a prank on them, he went to Venus, who was the Vance's enslaved nursemaid, and told Venus to bring him a jug of pot liquor, the liquid from stewing down vegetables like collard greens. So, Venus was in this very bizarre social place of being the person who was in charge of raising and taking care of the Vance children, but also being enslaved by the Vances. So she has to both be the person raising Zebulon Vance, and she has to, to a certain extent, follow his orders. So she gave him the jug of pot liquor and he served it to the guests. And of course, they took big swigs of it, expecting it to be whiskey or brandy and sputtered, and I'm sure said a lot of colorful curse words.

So this is an example of, maybe some indirect contact would've been made with drovers, especially at that drover's stand. But in terms of people enslaved on the plantation here in Reems Creek, having to, or getting to travel to go to various places, we don't have very much evidence of that other than Agnes and that membership at the church.

Sharon Fahrer: So, we don't really know if the enslaved people from one plantation knew the enslaved people from another plantation on a social basis, not as relatives.

Jordan Jenkins: We think they did, at least like plantation to plantation, being a little bit different from sending an enslaved person into town, per se. So I mentioned Hannah Prestwood a couple times. She was originally enslaved by the Vance's neighbor Jonathan Prestwood. And when Jonathan Prestwood was reaching the end of his life in the 1820s, he did something very bizarre in his will in that he gave Hannah Prestwood, a woman that he was enslaving, the option of which family she would like to be left to, and she chose to be willed to the Vances. And we think that that is likely evidence of Hannah Prestwood already having a community with the enslaved people on the Vance Plantation, more than her knowing the Vances personally, or having any particular affinity for them. We think that as enslaved people on neighboring plantations, they are probably interacting.

Sharon Fahrer: They might have been running errands or they might have met going somewhere.

Jordan Jenkins: Hmm, absolutely.

Sharon Fahrer: Maybe church.

Jordan Jenkins: Possibly the only, the only enslaved person, from this plantation that we have evidence of attending church is Agnes.

Sharon Fahrer: But they apparently had a section for enslaved people, so we're going to kind of guess that she wasn't the only one there.

Jordan Jenkins: Possibly.

Sharon Fahrer: So what happened after Emancipation? Did the Vance's own slaves up until emancipation?

Jordan Jenkins: Yes. So going back to that 1844 estate sale I mentioned where they had to sell off the plantation as well as 12 enslaved people, Mira Vance did not repurchase this plantation. But she did repurchase Leah Erwin and her four children as well as Venus, the nurse maid. And

Sharon Fahrer: Wait, when she was living in Marshall?

Jordan Jenkins: Yes.

Sharon Fahrer: She re--

Jordan Jenkins: Yes.

Sharon Fahrer: --purchased them.

Jordan Jenkins: But this, so this auction happened at the Buncombe County Courthouse, and after that auction she moved with her children and these enslaved people to a new home in downtown Asheville. So that's when the Vances relocate from Weaverville or Marshall to Asheville.

And that is where they continue to enslave people up until the Civil War. And after the Civil War, we believe by that point Venus had passed away. We don't think she ever lived to see emancipation, but the Erwins, they ended up purchasing their own home in the Sulphur Springs Township, so what's now West Asheville. And they were homeowners. They lived there with their daughters and their granddaughters. It seems like, for the most part, Sandy Erwin continued to work kind of as a hired farmhand, but we know that he was very well known and respected within the Black Community of Asheville, because in 1867 there was a meeting of African American men from around Buncombe County to write in support of the passage of the 14th Amendment to the United States Constitution. And Sandy Erwin was

Sharon Fahrer: I'll mention what that is.

Jordan Jenkins: The 14th Amendment? So, the 14th Amendment was the amendment to the US Constitution that gave African Americans the rights of citizenship. And at that meeting to express their support for this amendment, Sandy Erwin was voted to be the Chairman of that meeting by the rest of the Buncombe County Black community that it attended.

So you have them living as a, a decently, prominently family, apparently within the Asheville Black community. And you also have people that the Vances had originally enslaved here at their Reems Creek plantation, who, their descendants were sold at that auction, who after the Civil War, remained in the Reems Creek area. So, Agnes and Richard had passed away by that point, but two of their sons, Richard Jr. and Hudson Vance, they remained in Reems Creek post-emancipation with their own farm. We don't know exactly where that would've been, but it seems like it may have been on former Alexander land. But we don't know for certain.

Sharon Fahrer: Alexander being the people, not the town.

Jordan Jenkins: Yes. The people. Yeah.

Sharon Fahrer: So besides farming, what do you think some of these people would've done after emancipation?

Jordan Jenkins: So, we know that in the case of Leah's daughters in Asheville, one of their daughters was working as a laundress after the war. We don't know for sure, but I would guess that Leah is probably also working as a cook in some degree or another and likely passed those skills onto her daughters as well. But I don't think we have documentation saying for sure what all of their children were doing from a career standpoint, other than at least one daughter was working as a launderess. But again, this speaks to that tourism economy in Western North Carolina. Anyone who can work as a laundress, a cook, a maid, those are going to be highly sought-after people within our local economy.

Sharon Fahrer: A nanny.

Jordan Jenkins: A nanny as well.

Sharon Fahrer: Do you have any feeling for how many people were freed in this area at the time of emancipation?

Jordan Jenkins: I really don't, I don't have a good number. I'll tell you forthright, I tell people this on tour all the time. I do not have a good numbers brain. My brain doesn't hold on to numbers worth anything.

Sharon Fahrer: Okay. Do you know if any of them stayed in the area and still have descendants here?

Jordan Jenkins: Like I mentioned a little bit earlier, we know that Richard and Hudson Vance, Agnes and Richard's sons, stayed in this Reems Creek area post-emancipation. And we know that Hudson is buried at the Alexander Chapel Cemetery here along Reems Creek. And we've followed their lines a little bit. We actually know some of their other, later ascendants who were buried in local cemeteries here in the Reems Creek Valley. Eventually through marriage, the Vance last name is lost for the most part, but Agnes and Richard's descendants, by and large, become Councils, Flacks, Freemans, those are usually the names you're going to see for their descendants who remain.

Sharon Fahrer: Has anybody come who's a descendant? You know, not from living locally, but just sort of doing their genealogy?

Jordan Jenkins: Yeah, so we had several years ago, before my time here, a man who was a descendant from Richard and Agnes, visited, and I know that he, at least at that time, was living in the Washington DC area. So we know that there are, there's a descendant community out there, but it doesn't seem like there are that many people still in the Weaverville area who were descended from the people the Vances enslaved here. But we are, we are actively still doing that work, of trying to find these descendant connections and forge stronger relationships with the descendant community, because we want, we want to be a resource for people. But I don't know of anyone besides that gentleman several years ago who has specifically visited the site and was descended from people here.

Sharon Fahrer: I think there's an article about a woman that traced, I think it was in the Citizen-Times, that seemed to remember she was traced back to the Vances.

Jordan Jenkins: And that may have been that gentleman's daughter. It was a, there was a father and a daughter, I know, but I'd have to double check.

Sharon Fahrer: Is there anything else that you would like to add about this story or this background or these people?

Jordan Jenkins: I think that the main thing that I always want people to take away from a visit to this space is that, one, Western North Carolina was just as much a part of the culture and economy of slavery as the rest of the state and the rest of the South, because there is still this very prevailing idea that somehow slavery didn't exist here for whatever reason.

So that's, that's what we try to communicate first and foremost is yes, it did. And two, that enslaved people were so instrumental in the culture and economy of Western North Carolina, both again, at more agricultural sites like this and more tourism-driven sites like the drover stand and things like the Eagle Hotel in Asheville.

So, we have incredibly deep roots of Black history in this area and that's something that I want people to generally be more aware of.

Sharon Fahrer: Okay. One last question just came to my mind.

Jordan Jenkins: Mm-hmm.

Sharon Fahrer: Do you have any like. A lot of the, not everybody lived on a plantation or owned a plantation.

Jordan Jenkins: Yeah.

Sharon Fahrer: There were subsistence farmers in the area, too. Do you have any sort of clue as to their relationship to people who owned enslaved people? I mean, were they jealous? Were they hostile? Were they friendly? Did they borrow the slaves to help them?

Jordan Jenkins: As per usual, the answer is, “it depends.” So overall the answer is yes. All of those things, depending on what family you're looking at. There were people in general across Western North Carolina who were the small subsistence farmers or had whatever other career insert here, who did not enslave other human beings and sometimes that did result in this resentment towards the plantation owning class, especially because that was really like class resentment. It was people looking around and seeing a lot of wealth and power being concentrated in only a few hands. And enslaved people were incredibly valuable property. So, you have people who are resentful of the fact that some of these other families have a very disproportionate amount of power and influence, economically and politically.

So from that resentment, you have some people who are, who view the plantation owning lifestyle as very aspirational. So, I think sometimes people get tripped up when they're trying to navigate these dynamics because sometimes just general resentment of a plantation owner can be interpreted as anti-slavery sentiment or pro-emancipation sentiment when it wasn't. A lot of those same families who resented families like the Vances, they resented the Vances because they wanted to be in their place. They wanted to hold that power, hold that wealth, even at the expense of other human beings.

But you also had families who could not necessarily afford to outright enslave another human being, own an enslaved person, but they could afford to rent them from those who did. And that was also another way for plantation owning families like the Vances is to continually generate wealth, was by renting out the labor of the people they enslaved. So sometimes that's being done by unrelated families. And oftentimes you see these contracts written out as that the family renting someone is paying a wage. That wage is not going to the enslaved person. The wage is going to their enslaver. But off the record, you also have a lot of families like the Vances, who are just loaning enslaved people to their friends and family members, either pro bono or just under the table.

Then we don't have a lot of documentation on that per se, and we have to read between the lines. We think that's actually how Leah Erwin met her husband, Sandy Erwin. As Sandy's last name suggests, he was enslaved by the Erwin family who were relatives of the Vances through Mira. So we think that the Erwins were lending Sandy to the Vances, and that's how he and Leah met and got married. But we don't have any document that says that outright, that is an educated guess based on what knowledge we do have.

Sharon Fahrer: Well, seems like some of these people did get married after emancipation.

Jordan Jenkins: So at least for the people enslaved here, specifically by the Vances, we know of, I know, a couple different couples that got married pre-emancipation, including Leah and Sandy, they got married around 1840, who then, after Emancipation, went to the Register of Deeds and registered their marriage at that point, since the marriages of enslaved people were not legally recognized. So that's how we know that Leah and Sandy got married in 1840. They went to the Register of Deeds in 1866 and said that they had been husband and wife for around 25 years.

So you definitely have people, of course, getting married, post-emancipation, but for most of the generations of people that the Vances are enslaving here, we know of people getting enslaved beforehand and then having to legally register them after emancipation.

Sharon Fahrer: So I'm just wondering what constituted being married as an enslaved person meant? It's like who married them?

Jordan Jenkins: Mm-hmm. And that's another one of those "it depends". So at least in Leah and Sandy's case, it seems like for the most part, even though Sandy was enslaved by the Erwins, that he was more often than not living on Vance property. But since he was not enslaved outright by the Vances at the time of that estate sale in 1844, he was not one of the people who put up for auction.

But Leah and their four children, who we think were all under the ages of four years old at that point, were put up for auction. And in their case, Mira repurchased Leah and all of their children, and Sandy moved with them to downtown Asheville afterwards. So the Erwin family was not separated, but from what documentary evidence we have across Western North Carolina, their story there seems to be a rarity.

There was, in Southern Appalachia, particularly, a very prominent culture of marriages between enslaved people not being respected, sometimes being outright manipulated by their enslavers, in terms of, some enslavers literally ordering people they enslaved to marry one another, whether they wanted to or not. Or when two people got married because they wanted to, then the father, the husband being loaned out, being sold away. Again, it was a very vulnerable position to be in.

Sharon Fahrer: Maybe, Sandy was it, maybe he was a freed man if he didn't belong to Mrs. Vance, but he moved with them.

Jordan Jenkins: So we had a record of him kind of negotiating with Mira about purchasing his freedom. But this is happening in the midst of the war, and we don't have documents to tell us how that actually panned out.

So we know that that was a conversation at one point. I don't know if that actually became a legal reality before emancipation happened for everyone, but it's possible.

Sharon Fahrer: Okay. Well, thank you. That was enlightening. You've given us a good snapshot of what things were like in this time period and so thanks.

Jordan Jenkins: Thank you.

[END OF FIRST FILE, 00:53:53]

Jordan Jenkins Interview, Part 2 (Enslaved Quarters)

Jordan Jenkins: So, this building is actually a building that was relocated here from another site. So, the buildings that we have on site today are kind of Frankensteined together. The Vance House had to be mostly rebuilt in the 1950s and 1960s, and all the other buildings are either relocated from other properties around Buncombe and Madison County, or new reconstructions. So this particular building is the oldest one on site today. It was originally built in 1790 and relocated here from Swannanoa in the 1960s. But in Swannanoa it had been on a Patton family property, and we don't actually know 100% for certain how the Pattons utilize this building.

But it has the general architecture that most slave dwellings in Western North Carolina would've had at that time. So that is how we have it staged out, and that's how we interpret it today. And all the furniture that you see in here is based off of the belongings of Hannah Prestwood. So when Jonathan Prestwood, her enslaver, willed her to the Vances in the 1820s, along with Hannah, he left the Vances two bed frames, a walnut chair and table, a large wheel for spinning, two large pots for cooking and a chest for her clothing. So that is why we have this furniture out. In general, these are the kinds of things that we know at least one person enslaved on this property owned at one point.

Sharon Fahrer That's pretty snazzy, that bed, though.

Jordan Jenkins: Yeah.

Sharon Fahrer I mean, I wouldn't expect they had a bed.

Jordan Jenkins: That's something that people are usually very surprised by is, not only is there a bed, but there are two beds. There's a trundle underneath. So, people are usually, taken by surprise that we have two beds here in a slave dwelling. And again, we know that Hannah owned two beds, at least at one point, but many enslaved people did not have bed frames like that. At which point she would've been around 40 years old, we think. So, this is not necessarily indicative of the average enslaved material culture experience in Western North Carolina, but it is based on the experience of at least one person.

And the Vances were, were not so kind as to leave us a really detailed map of all the buildings they had on their plantation. So, we don't actually know for sure what buildings they did and did not have, including how many slave dwellings they had on site. So, my educated guess is that they may have had two, especially since there were two main families that the Vances enslaved here. There may have been a slave dwelling per family, but that is just a guess. It's very possible that there was just one slave dwelling or more than that, we just don't know for sure.

Sharon Fahrer Does this have an upstairs?

Jordan Jenkins: It has an attic.

Sharon Fahrer So possibly people slept up there?

Jordan Jenkins: Possibly.

Sharon Fahrer Cool. And what's that way?

Jordan Jenkins: So that is a second, smaller room. We are in the long-term process of turning that room into a stand-alone exhibit, talking a little bit more about slavery in Western North Carolina. So hopefully if you visit us in a year or so, that's going to be a little bit more interesting to look at. In the meantime, we're just using it as storage, but it is just a smaller bedroom like this.

Sharon Fahrer Cool.

[END OF SECOND FILE, 00:04:49]